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INDIAN-PAKISTANI VIEWS ON A NUCLEAR WEAPONS OPTION AND POTENTIAL REPERCUSSIONS

Summary

India and Pakistan have decided to keep the option of developing nuclear weapons, and signs of preparation for underground nuclear tests have been identified in both countries. Security considerations, prestige, status, and political factors are important in sustaining domestic support for a nuclear weapons option.

Both India and Pakistan believe that if they fail to keep this option open, they may be placed in a weakened strategic position vis-a-vis potentially threatening neighbors. India refused to sign the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on grounds that it unfairly discriminated between nuclear and non-nuclear states.* India strongly resists any pressure to foreclose the nuclear option as long as China possesses a nuclear weapon. Pakistan, for its part, refuses to sign the NPT because India has not done so.

International efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons have historically run up against the mutual Indian and Pakistani refusal to be the first to halt the subcontinent's drift toward a nuclear weapons capability. It is difficult to imagine that adding a nuclear element to the Indo-Pakistani relationship would bring either party greater security. Yet both India and Pakistan act as if each had no course of action except to force the other toward a nuclear weapons option.

* India has, however, been party to the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) and has strongly advocated such universal arms control agreements as the Comprehensive Test Ban (CTB). Pakistan has signed but not ratified the LTBT.

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The incentive for Pakistan to halt the spiral toward nuclear weapons seems marginally greater than that for India. Pakistan has little hope of developing a nuclear capability that India would not quickly overmatch. Thus, if by building its own atomic bombs Pakistan drives India toward developing nuclear weapons, Pakistan could face suicide. For if Pakistan uses nuclear weapons against India, India very likely will retaliate by destroying Pakistan.

The development of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan would probably have a destabilizing effect outside South Asia as well. Once India has a strategic capability to threaten China, a nuclear exchange on the subcontinent will pose risks of escalation of nuclear conflict between India and China, with destabilizing implications for the Sino-Soviet relationship and global security. In addition, a weapons program in South Asia adds another unsettling element to tensions in the Middle East, because both Pakistan and India might be tempted by economic and strategic considerations to supply sensitive technology to the Arab states.

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Motivations for Developing a Nuclear Capability

India and Pakistan continue to keep alive the nuclear weapons option primarily because they believe it is a potentially valuable deterrent against attack. From New Delhi's vantage point, the possible nuclear threat from China has been the underlying incentive for supporting the nuclear weapons option. India believes that China's long-range goal is the domination of all of Asia. India considers itself a potential target of Chinese aggression. Reinforcing India's decision on a nuclear option is the apparent Pakistani effort thereby to develop a nuclear weapons capability, which the Indians fear Islamabad might use to extract concessions from New Delhi.

Pakistani moves to develop a nuclear weapons capability are a direct response to the perceived threat from India's growing nuclear explosives and space programs. Pakistan's active drive for the relevant technical capabilities coincided with former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's ascent to power in December 1971 in the wake of India's humiliating defeat of Pakistan and the loss of its eastern province (now Bangladesh). That program went into high gear after India's 1974 nuclear test. Bhutto and others saw in a Pakistani nuclear weapon a means to punish another Indian attack so severely that it would serve as a deterrent to aggression.

The Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which further undermined Pakistan's regional position, have provided additional post facto justifications for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Moreover, India's veiled warnings against Pakistani re-armament in the face of the new threats to it have probably exacerbated Pakistan's sense of vulnerability and thus strengthened incentives for developing a nuclear weapon. Finally, the lack of reliable outside security guarantors makes a nuclear weapon seem particularly attractive to a country virtually surrounded by potentially hostile powers that are militarily more powerful than it.

Besides specifically regional security considerations, the desire for international prestige and status has served as a justification for a nuclear capability and has interacted with the security rationale in both South Asian states to widen the circle of bureaucratic and public support. India, for its part, wants to be considered a state that counts in the Asian balance of power--a state that cannot be pushed around by the superpowers. In addition, a nuclear weapon would place India in the international "big league," a position many Indians believe is its rightful destiny.

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The prestige value of a nuclear weapons program (or even simply keeping alive the option of such a program) could similarly complement Pakistan's strategic planning. Such a program would be one means of deflating India's regional dominance. In addition, a nuclear weapons option could bolster Pakistan's status and leverage among the Islamic states.

The possibility of the transfer of nuclear technology or fissionable materials by Pakistan would arouse interest among potential Middle Eastern customers (e.g., Libya and Iraq). Pakistan's current centrifuge and reprocessing technology, for example, could provide a solid foundation to produce nuclear weapons.

Former Prime Minister Bhutto alluded to some of these status and political considerations when he took credit in his "last will and testament" for the development of a "full nuclear capability" that would put "Islamic civilization" on a nuclear par with "Hebrew," "Christian," "Hindu," and "Communist civilizations."

Another potential spinoff of a nuclear program is to boost domestic political support for the regime. Indira Gandhi, who ordered the 1974 Indian nuclear explosion in part to bolster her sagging popularity, currently does not need such a prop. Pakistani President Zia ul Haq, on the other hand, is unpopular and might find a test a useful tactic to boost his domestic standing.

Technical Situation

Pressures may be building on Prime Minister Gandhi to resume nuclear testing and to deploy nuclear weapons. India wants to be well positioned to respond to a Pakistani nuclear test--a development many Indian intelligence officers consider possible within a year. Excavation activity in the immediate vicinity of the 1974 Indian nuclear test site continues. These preparations in the Thar Desert strongly suggest the Indians are preparing one or more test holes. It is uncertain that Gandhi has endorsed a resumption of nuclear testing or an expansion of the nuclear explosives program that apparently has been largely dormant since 1974, but she is clearly signaling that India might eventually do so.

There are no indications that the Indians have fabricated nuclear devices since the 1974 test, but this possibility obviously cannot be excluded. Despite periodic statements by Indian leaders that India does not want nuclear weapons, it is prudent to assume that India's nuclear explosives capability--if only in terms of design improvements--has not stood still.

Questions of political decisionmaking aside, India may already have satisfied all the technical requirements to resume nuclear testing and to develop a modest stockpile of nuclear devices. India may now have enough unsafeguarded weapons grade material (plutonium)

to fabricate 10-20 nuclear devices, but the country currently lacks sufficient enriched uranium for a larger weapons program. India will have access to much greater quantities of unsafeguarded plutonium as new natural uranium-fueled power reactors begin to come on line in the mid-1980s. At that point, India will be in a position to develop a much larger nuclear arsenal.

If India chooses to develop nuclear weapons, it could deliver them to targets in Pakistan using aircraft now in its inventory. Work is also proceeding on a satellite launch missile which probably could be modified eventually to serve as an intermediate-range ballistic missile.

Islamabad is building unsafeguarded enrichment and reprocessing facilities capable of producing fissile material for its nuclear weapons program. In addition, Pakistan has already undertaken a substantial amount of the necessary design and high explosives testing of the explosives triggering package and is probably capable of producing a workable device at this time. But barring foreign acquisition of fissile material, it is believed that Pakistan will not have sufficient fissile material to test a device until late 1982 or early 1983. Even after a successful test, Pakistan will still lag considerably behind India in nuclear weapons capability. By the time Pakistan produces several deliverable nuclear weapons, India might well have several dozen.

Enrichment appears to offer Pakistan the only route to weapons-grade material unencumbered by International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. Work is proceeding at the uranium enrichment complex at Kahuta. Sufficient fissile material for a test will most likely not be available before 1983, with large-scale production at least a year later than that. It is estimated that the plant will have the capacity to support a nuclear weapons program. Sufficient fissile material for a test could be available earlier if the Pakistanis succeed in their efforts to develop a reprocessing capability. The safeguarded fuel from Pakistan's sole operating power reactor at Karachi would be the most likely source of material for reprocessing. Tunneling activity in Baluchistan identified in 1979 could be intended for preparation of an underground site for testing a nuclear device. Although work continues at the site, there is no indication of a test in the near future. The site probably is already available for use anytime a device is completed.

Decision To Test?

The Pakistanis have been officially silent on a test and have refused to provide to the US, Canada, Great Britain, and others any assurances regarding a nuclear test. (They have repeatedly denied any plans to produce nuclear weapons.) Indian Ministry of External Affairs Secretary Eric Gonsalves, on the other hand, privately

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admitted to US officials during his US visit that the Thar Desert site in Rajasthan is being prepared for a "peaceful nuclear explosion," though he added that Indira Gandhi had not yet made a decision on the timing.

The Indian revelation does not necessarily mean that India is on the verge of producing nuclear weapons, or even testing. Rather, the simple knowledge that India can resume testing in the near future serves several important political purposes:

- reminding the Pakistanis that India is considerably ahead of Pakistan in the nuclear weapons field, and thus cautioning them not to proceed with a testing program;
- bringing home to the US the dangers of proliferation on the subcontinent and thereby pushing the US to tighten the nonproliferation screws on Pakistan; and
- reminding others that India is a significant Asian actor whose views count in the calculus of power relations in Asia. (This could be intended to influence the superpowers vis-a-vis the Afghan crisis.)

Gandhi may well let the Pakistanis make the first move. She does not have to prove that India has a nuclear capability. There are no compelling domestic political compulsions to test, as there were in 1974. She commands the political scene, and there currently is no viable opposition to her position. Allowing the Pakistanis to test first, moreover, would tend to place the moral blame, both at home and abroad, on the Pakistanis.

Regarding Pakistan, several political constraints will affect the timing of a Pakistani decision on testing. A Pakistani test:

- might provoke India and the USSR to step up pressure on Pakistan;
- might cause countries like Japan to terminate economic assistance; and
- would have adverse effects on Pakistan's budding security relationship with the US. (A Pakistani test not only would cause a major uproar on Capitol Hill but also would activate several laws that could stop the flow of US economic and military assistance to Pakistan.)

Still, moving toward a demonstrated deterrent may seem a necessary move to prevent unacceptable external influence over Pakistani policy. The martial law rulers of Pakistan at the very least

apparently want to give the impression that Pakistan is moving toward an explosives capability. Bhutto so successfully invested reprocessing with significance as a symbol of national sovereignty and resolve that it would be difficult for the military, which ousted him, to back away from his plans, even if it wanted to.

Potential Political and Security Ramifications of a Pakistani Test

Should President Zia decide that the strategic gains of a test outweigh the losses, the most immediate and important response would come from India. Gandhi warned during the 1981 parliamentary defense debate that a Pakistani nuclear test would have "grave and irreversible" consequences for regional relations, though she surely wants to assess the significance of a Pakistani test on India's security before determining a specific course of action.

If a Pakistani test occurs within the next few years, Islamabad will have neither sufficient fissionable material nor the technology to deploy a militarily significant number of air-deliverable nuclear weapons against India. If other aspects of the Indo-Pakistani military balance of power remain relatively stable and Pakistan asserts that its explosion is "peaceful," India will probably prefer to wait until the end of the 1980s to assert openly a nuclear weapons defense posture. By then, India will possess sufficient fissionable material for a respectable nuclear arsenal. At that time, its missile program may also be closer to providing a strategic capability of deterrence against China. Moving in the near future to deploy an airborne nuclear capability to counter a Pakistani threat could be provocative to China at a time when India is seeking to improve relations with China.

Following a Pakistani test, Gandhi might consider:

- publicly accepting assertions by Pakistan that its test was a "peaceful nuclear explosion" (like India's in 1974), while deferring any Indian testing; and
- immediately ordering another Indian "peaceful nuclear explosion" with the implicit warning that further Pakistani testing or other indications of a Pakistani weapons program would be openly matched by parallel Indian efforts.

In both cases, Gandhi would probably quietly activate a weaponization research program.

A decision to resume testing in response to a Pakistani test involves comparatively few risks for India. The Indians have probably concluded that there is little chance for them to receive future enriched uranium shipments from the US. The USSR is a

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viable alternative supplier of enriched fuel, and it is unlikely that the Soviets will make much fuss over a second Indian detonation. The Indians could count on world opinion blaming Pakistan for a resumption of testing on the subcontinent. A quick response would be popular at home, underscoring India's technical advances and its superiority over Pakistan in this field.

India can be expected to consider harsher responses if Indian intelligence determines, or Zia announces, that Pakistan is actively engaged in a weapons program. Under these circumstances, Gandhi is very likely to order a resumption of tests, to announce publicly a nuclear weaponization research effort, and to increase budgetary allocations for missile development.

If Pakistan simultaneously engages in an adventurous foreign policy, as India fears, then more drastic action will be contemplated. India fears that Pakistan might launch an attack against it with the expectation that the international community will call for a ceasefire and thus force the contentious issue of Kashmir into the international arena. The Indian counterattack would almost certainly involve efforts to destroy Pakistan's nuclear facilities. India would undoubtedly ignore any international resolution concerning Kashmir. (The Soviets could be expected to veto any UN action on this matter.)

India under such circumstances might even decide to eliminate the threat of a nuclear-armed Pakistan once and for all by a counterattack aimed at the destruction of Pakistan. New Delhi probably would not want to annex any part of Pakistan (with the exception of Pakistani-held Kashmir, which it now claims) but might find a divided Pakistan easier to manage than an adventurous state armed with nuclear weapons.

Short of Pakistani-provoked fighting, India is not likely to launch a take-out strike, because:

- India's military cannot assure Gandhi that it can eliminate Pakistan's well-defended nuclear facilities; and
- such a strike would antagonize China, the Islamic states of the Middle East, and perhaps the US and thereby severely reduce India's diplomatic maneuverability and weaken its strategic position.

Indian and Pakistani possession of nuclear weapons would probably result in greater regional uncertainty. It is difficult to be optimistic that a stable, long-term mutual deterrence relationship would be established. Political instability, the revival of frictions over the disputed state of Kashmir, differing strategic interests, and deep-seated mutual distrust are likely

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to produce future regional crises. Under nuclear arms race conditions, a crisis that results in military hostilities would always have a chance of escalating to a nuclear exchange.

A Pakistani testing program would have reverberations outside South Asia, particularly if it were accompanied by a parallel Indian effort. Initially, both China and the USSR might advise their respective South Asian friends to exercise restraint to reduce the uncertainties that a nuclear arms race would involve. If the two South Asian states moved to develop nuclear weapons, both China and the USSR would have strong temptations to shape relations among the four countries in ways that would reduce Moscow's and Beijing's respective vulnerabilities. In the long term, once India had a strategic capability threatening to China, a nuclear exchange on the subcontinent would pose risks of escalation of nuclear conflict between India and China, with destabilizing implications for the Sino-Soviet relationship and global security.

Competitive Indian-Pakistani testing would weaken international efforts to prevent horizontal proliferation within Southwest Asia as well as outside the region. Israel would be concerned that Pakistan might provide other Islamic states with either fissionable material or technology that would hasten the day of an "Islamic bomb" or bombs. Israel has already complained publicly that Pakistan plans to produce nuclear weapons, with financial assistance from Arab states. In the wake of the Israeli strike on Iraq, some Arab states may start viewing Pakistan as a relatively "safe" location for nuclear facilities. Under such circumstances both Pakistan and India might become willing suppliers of nuclear technology to Middle Eastern states--Pakistan, if it calculates that there are important security and economic payoffs (oil at concessionary prices and remittances from "guest workers") from the rich oil-producing states; and India, to counter Pakistani efforts.

Such competition between India and Pakistan undoubtedly would raise the tension level in the Middle East significantly. We have no information that either has yet provided sensitive technology to another state, but forbearance might weaken.

Prepared by INR/NESA/SOA: W. K. Andersen INR/PMA: C. I. Cohen
x28575 x20369

Approved by INR/NESA: M. L. Greene INR/PMA: G. Fox
x22757 x28230

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